

Ferguson, James. 2015. *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*. Durham, London: Duke University Press. xv+264 pp. Pb.: \$24.95. ISBN: 9780822358862.

Anthropologists have traditionally struggled to explain the fact that most developing projects in many underdeveloped countries fail. James Ferguson's book, based on the Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture, which he delivered at the University of Rochester in October 2009, presents a formidable study of the rise of social welfare programs in Southern Africa. Contrary to popular belief, Ferguson demonstrates how the "cash flow" through the "basic income grants" (BIG) serves both to alleviate poverty, and to dramatically influence the changes in the local communities across the region.

The concept of these grants is not new: it can be traced at least to 1795 and one of the "founding fathers" of the United States, Thomas Paine. It was discussed by the British philosopher and human rights advocate Sir Bertrand Russell as far back as in 1918 (p. 53), and contemporary advocates include media celebrities Mark Zuckerberg (founder of Facebook) and Elon Musk (inventor and one of the richest people in the world), as well as Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town (and Nobel Peace Prize laureate) Desmond Tutu. Among the left-wing critics of this scheme, some point that its origin might even lay in the 'negative income tax' concept suggested by the famous economist Milton Friedman (p. 30). The basic idea is that people with low income should receive basic grants (small amounts of cash), instead of some other form of social welfare benefit. Although the concept has been tried in many underdeveloped countries of the world (and it might take off in some of the most developed ones, like Finland), it is the Southern African model that is in the focus of Ferguson's attention – a model that might prove to have some interesting implications for the study of development.

In the Introduction, Ferguson sets out the general idea of basic income grants, taking into account wider historical and political circumstances, including the end of apartheid, and the subsequent rise in inequality in South Africa. Ideological purity aside, the strange mixture of ideas that resulted in small income grants proved to be surprisingly successful in South Africa, as well as in Namibia (although he notes that the Namibian case is not as well studied). The first chapter (*Give a Man a Fish: From Patriarchal Productionism to the Revalorization of Distribution*) provides a discussion of the relationship between dependency and distribution, with references to political economy. James Ferguson argues that, with this new scheme, 'We are dealing, then, with an emergent politics – one full of dangers, it is true, but also of possibilities' (p. 61).

The second chapter (*What Comes after the Social: Historicizing the Future of Social Protection in Africa*) presents the specificities of the "African" ways of "constructing the social." One might even argue that a "total social fact" that the state provides is shaping new historical realities.

The third chapter, *Distributed Livelihoods: Dependence and the Labor of Distribution in the Lives of the Southern African Poor (And Not-So-Poor)*, revisits the concept of distribution. State assistance is inserted 'into a world in which distribution is already both a pervasive process and a concrete set of activities' (p. 117).

The fourth chapter (*The Social Life of Cash Payments: Money, Markets, and*

the Mutualities of Poverty) provides the context that shows how the lives of the Southern African poor are affected by different social benefits. Ferguson cites Brazil's *Bolsa Familia* program as an example of a successful welfare program in Latin America. Ferguson seeks to dispense with the "traditional Left's suspicion of 'cash payment'" as something that comes from the Left's general suspicion of the markets, but he takes Mauss's view that markets are integral instruments for social cohesion.

The fifth chapter (*Declarations of Dependence: Labor, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa*) sets a historical backdrop for different ideas of dependency. 'Declarations of dependency are a challenge to liberal common sense [...] they present us with the theoretical and political challenge of a form of agency that seeks its own submission. [...] But however uncomfortable it may make us, an ethnographically informed approach to the political challenges of the present will need to take such forms of agency seriously' (p. 162).

The sixth chapter (*A Rightful Share: Distribution beyond Gift and Market*) deals with the ideological roots of distributive policies, and Ferguson focuses in particular on populist assertions of the highly controversial (to put it mildly) South African politician Julius Malema. Contrary to the opinion of most contemporary economists (and certainly in contrast to one of the examples that he cites earlier in the book, Tanzania), Ferguson seems to approve of Malema's idea that national ownership of all resources is the key to the successful (and just) distribution of them (pp. 170–171). He seems to be firmly in favour of new political forms of organisation that might provide for more justice and equality: 'New kinds of welfare states, that is, may open up the possibility of imagining new kinds of politics – perhaps even new kinds of socialism' (p. 189).

In the Conclusion (*What Next for Distributive Politics?*), the author seeks to expand the idea of a "radical politics" of distribution that would be more globally applicable. Citing examples from Marx, via Kropotkin, to Žižek, the idea that anthropologists should use ethnography to inform and influence the ways in which their societies are organised and in which the wealth is distributed. 'To say as much is to invoke a politics yet to be invented, it is true' (p. 216). It is a pity that James Ferguson does not really address the issue of how the political systems that have so thus been organised on the lines suggested by Marx (and, to a lesser extent, by Kropotkin and Žižek) have failed. Perhaps this is a topic for another book.

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